

● REVIEW PRODUCT OF THE MONTH

ATC SIACD

CD/DAC/amplifier system delivers scintillating sound in a compact form



ATC SIACD

Price £2795

Type CD player/DAC/amplifier

Digital inputs USB, optical, coaxial electrical

Analogue inputs Two sets of RCA phonos, 3.5mm stereo on front panel

Analogue outputs One pair of speakers, line audio out, headphones

Digital formats played Up to 24-bit/192kHz via optical and coaxial, up to 16-bit/48kHz via USB

Accessories supplied Remote handset

Dimensions (WxHxD) 31.5x11.2x42.5cm

atcloudspeakers.co.uk

All-in-ones are all the go at the moment. Maybe it's because we're all living in more bijou accommodation, or maybe it's just that very affordable micro-systems have got so good that higher-end manufacturers have realised buyers are looking for even better sound without filling one end of the room with menacing black boxes.

The system we have here – the £2795 ATC SIACD – is made by one of the best-known names in what might be described as 'British prosumer audio'. The company covers the requirements of studios and concert halls, and those of enthusiastic home listeners. Launched alongside the CDA2 CD player/DAC/preamp a few months back, it combines a CD player, digital-to-analogue converter complete with a galvanically isolated USB input for use with a computer (and to keep computer noise out of the audio circuits), preamplifier and 100W-per-channel power amplifier, all in one compact case. Well,

narrow at least: the front panel of the SIACD may be just 31.5cm across but the unit is 42.5cm deep front-to-back.

It comes from a company originally founded in London in 1974 to make custom speaker drive units for the pro-sound industry and which is still heavily involved in the professional audio market.

'This Stroud-based company has built drive units and speakers for everything from radio station monitors to Pink Floyd's PA systems'

Now based in Stroud, Gloucestershire, where its products are still handmade, it has a range of high-quality loudspeakers and audio components much favoured by enthusiastic listeners around the world.

Along the way the company developed the acclaimed SM-75-150s soft dome midrange driver, which went on to be

ATC's signature drive unit in both pro and consumer speakers, built drive units and speakers for everything from radio station monitors to Pink Floyd's PA systems, and championed active speaker systems across its range. Having established a reputation for bombproof build and reliability, essential in the pro-audio world, back in the mid-'90s it launched its own audiophile electronics in the form of the SCA2 preamplifier and SPA2-150 power amplifier, and later the SIA2-150 integrated amplifier.

Unboxing the SIACD, the first impression is that none of ATC's hard-won reputation for quality has been sacrificed here. There's a solidity about the whole feel of the product, and the solid aluminium controls have positive actions and feel as good as the main casework and slimline CD loader. The only let-down is the remote control handset, which feels a bit lightweight and plasticky, and has a lot of identical tiny black buttons.

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SUGGESTED PARTNERS

The SIACD is an excellent one-box solution. Here's everything else you need to make the most of it...

APPLE MAC MINI

The USB input of the SIACD is ideal for streaming from a computer: the little Apple Mac Mini is a perfect partner and can be controlled without a monitor from a smartphone or tablet.



ATC SCM11 SPEAKERS

Launched in the summer, the new ATC SCM11 speakers, at £1200/pr, are a fine match for the SIACD. Or, if you want smaller speakers, the ATC SCM7s are £810/pr.



The main unit looks good, too, with its anodised aluminium faceplate extrusion brushed and finished in either silver or black, and the matching casework detailed with fan-shaped vents to aid cooling. The chassis itself is built from a combination of steel and aluminium, and uses constrained layer damping to control panel resonances, adding to the feeling of deadness and solidity about the whole enterprise.

The digital-to-analogue converter has USB and S/PDIF electrical and optical inputs, and uses the Wolfson WM8470 chipset. It can handle signals up to 24-bit/192kHz on the conventional digital inputs and up to 16-bit/44.1kHz on the USB, which is the main area in which it lags behind some of the USB DACs on the market at the moment: 24-bit/192kHz via USB is common and some will even go all the way up to 32-bit/384kHz and/or handle DSD signals in their native form. In addition to the digital inputs, the SIACD has two sets of analogue inputs on standard RCA phono sockets, a 3.5mm stereo input on the front panel for portable devices, and a single set of line-level outputs.

The amplification here is a new 'grounded source' design from ATC. Eschewing the class D amps used by some other manufacturers, the company's engineers have stuck to their latest version of tried-and-tested class A/B technology, with further tuning to their MOSFET output stage 'to give vanishingly low levels of distortion, very wide bandwidth and a reduced idle temperature'. The company says the result is that 'the resolution offered by this approach is simply above and beyond what is available from most "high-end" stand-alone power amplifiers, let alone "all-in-one" player/amplifiers'.

PERFORMANCE

As you'd hope, given the system's heritage in studio and radio monitoring, the SIACD has a very direct, wide-open sound, fully able to make the most of everything you choose to throw at it. It's something of a shame that the DAC implementation here hasn't been designed to accept higher-than-CD-resolution audio files over USB from the computer, as so many DACs and other products I have reviewed of late have been: if you want to play 'hi-res' files from

your computer to the ATC, you're going to need either a computer with a digital output capable of delivering such content to the SIACD's optical or electrical digital inputs, or a USB-to-S/PDIF converter device such as the M2Tech HiFace Two or Musical Fidelity's now-discontinued V-Link 192 interface.

Using an original V-Link I was able to feed 24/96 content into the SIACD, and I used the digital output of the Naim NDS to feed it with higher resolutions, as well as playing CDs and connecting the NDS in via the analogue inputs. In every case, the SIACD is capable of showing that the built-in amplification here is of quite remarkable quality, not only in its openness and solidity but in the power and reach of its bass, and the surefooted way in which it grips the speakers to which it's connected. I tried it with both my 'usual' PMC OB1s and the NEAT Motive SX 1 speakers also reviewed this month, and to which I have been listening a lot recently, and in either case the SIACD delighted with its sheer sense of effortlessness and unburstability, allied to the way it draws you into the music, revealing more of recordings than you might expect of an 'all-in-one' such as this.

That low-end ability plays a major part in the good impression the ATC creates from the start, its extension being matched with speed and deft control, but across the frequency range this system is striking and demands high-quality speakers if it's to be heard at its best. No surprise there, I guess, given the quality of the company's own loudspeakers; but it's also worth noting that there's a rather good headphone amplifier built in, too.

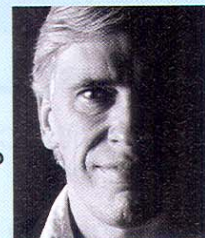
Just as ATC has refused to go down the class D amplifier route for fear of what it sees as sonic compromise, so it quickly becomes obvious that the SIACD isn't a system in which corners have been cut in order to cram it into a room-friendly size and shape. This is a no-compromise 'music centre' for those willing to look beyond the mini-system norm, handbuilt in Britain, backed with a six-year warranty and capable of delivering the kind of sound for which you might expect to need a separate CD player, preamplifier and power amp. It's really not hard to see the appeal of this package, is it? **G**

DESIGN NOTES

Bill Woodman

Founder, ATC

On jazz piano, why pro and home audio are the same, and the benefits of high resolution



Born in rural Australia in 1946, Billy Woodman would like to have studied music, but that meant moving to Melbourne or Sydney; finances dictated engineering at the nearby university at Bendigo instead. But Woodman had been learning classical piano from the age of eight. 'At the time it was certainly considered desirable and probably almost mandatory to be learning to play a musical instrument,' and this gave him a lifelong love of piano, and especially jazz piano.

His most memorable musical experiences? 'Hearing a performance of Peter Sculthorpe's *Sun Music* in the late 1960s, followed closely by the remarkable jazz piano of Bryce Rohde in Australia during my formative years. I still listen regularly to the music of both Sculthorpe and Rohde.'

Not surprisingly, piano also plays a major part in the tuning and development of new products, 'because of the dynamic range needed to reproduce the initial note strike, as well as the linear magnitude and minimum phase response and very low distortion to resolve the complexity and subtlety of the note's decay. A Decca CD we regularly use is Peter Schreier and András Schiff performing Schubert's "Der Neugierige"; I also use recordings by Bill Evans and Diana Krall.'

With ATC speakers in use at over half of Hollywood's sound stages as well as major recording studios and broadcasters, Woodman sees no difference in the requirements of home and professional-use speakers: 'They both deserve the highest possible performance.' And while he acknowledges that consumer audio has been driven more by convenience than performance for at least a generation, he says: 'There's no greater pleasure for a music lover than to sit and listen to a high resolution recording of a musical favourite. It's almost as good as hearing it live.'

'For a music lover, listening to a high-resolution recording is almost as good as hearing it live'